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Sarah Ioannides

Remembering Twelve Years as Music Director of the Spartanburg Philharmonic Orchestra, 2005-2017
by Steve Wong

When Sarah Ioannides steps down from the podium after conducting her final performance at Twichell Auditorium, she will leave a lasting legacy of innovation and inspiration. As the 68th season of the symphony comes to a close, the Maestro will conclude her 12 years serving as Music Director of the SPO. Since 2005, when the orchestra officially changed its name from the Greater Spartanburg Philharmonic (GSP) to the Spartanburg Philharmonic Orchestra (SPO), she has worked with the ensemble to offer creative and educational programs that engaged audience members, young and old. Her signature style of presenting well-known masterpieces alongside new works of classical music helped the SPO to develop an impressive, distinct sound, emerging as one of the most highly esteemed orchestras in the region.

The Grand Finale (<http://www.spartanburgphilharmonic.org/orchestra-schedule/87/Grand+Finale+%7C+featuring+the+Converse+Chorale>) concert on April 29 will be sure to delight listeners and fans of the Maestro. On the program will be Debussy's *Nocturnes, III, Sirènes*, a hauntingly beautiful piece that features the Converse Chorale – the ensemble that took the stage with Sarah in her debut performance as Music Director in Spartanburg. The concert will conclude with the spectacular Symphony No. 3 (Organ Symphony) by Saint-Saëns, a piece that she holds dear to her heart. In 2004, Sarah auditioned to be the next Music Director of the SPO, conducting the Saint-Saëns with Brennan Szafron on the organ. The performance was a resounding success and Sarah was awarded the position.

"I'm sure it will be a bittersweet moment for Sarah, as well as for the musicians and the patrons. In many ways, it will be as if Sarah and the Orchestra have come full circle," Kathryn Boucher, SPO's Executive Director, said. "Sarah and I were friends before we became colleagues, so I am personally sad that I will not see her on a regular basis in Spartanburg. And yet, I am happy that she is taking a leap of faith for her career by leaving Spartanburg, to be open to other possibilities that may come. She is on a great trajectory, and I am excited to see where she lands!"

Sarah's current home base is in Connecticut, but she travels the world as a guest conductor and teacher. During her years with the SPO, she also served as Music Director in El Paso, TX and now Tacoma, WA. As a world-famous and jetsetting conductor — and one of the very few women in the world to hold the position of Music Director — Sarah has a bright future ahead of her. But as Spartanburg was her first professional conducting job back in 2005, the Hub City will always hold a special place in her heart.

"I will miss most the orchestra and especially performing in Twichell, which is one of the greatest concert halls I know," she said. "I will, of course, miss seeing very many dear friends on a regular basis, but our relationships will be longstanding, and I certainly hope to be able to come back to visit the orchestra in the future too. My instincts have guided me on this completely. It was a hard decision to make, but I always felt the time would come when I need to move on to the next phase of my career. With so many positive things in place with the orchestra, staff and board, it is ripe for new leadership."

One of Sarah's closest relationships — both personal and professional — has been with Concertmaster Sarah Johnson. "I have enjoyed and valued my friendship with her enormously," Johnson said. "Sarah is a loyal and trusted friend, and I will miss her. When the going got tough — and it always does in every organization at some point — she and I could always have frank and candid conversations. At first, I think we were all a little intimidated by her and her fantastic skills and imagination. She challenged the orchestra to aspire to the highest levels of playing and in the most difficult and ambitious repertoire. She has a wonderful and a slightly sly sense of humor, which was greatly appreciated, especially in those moments of high drama."

During her tenure with the orchestra, Sarah conducted over 75 concerts, offering Spartanburg residents an opportunity to hear dozens of world-class guest artists and over a hundred classical masterworks. At the same time, her work with contemporary composers has expanded the repertoire for the symphony, developing the orchestral canon for future generations. Guest composers include internationally recognized artists Dario Marianelli, Kati Agócs, and Sean O'Boyle. In 2011, the SPO gave the premiere performance of *Falling Man* by Kenneth Fuchs — a piece that went on to receive national acclaim and was presented by The Juilliard School and Steinway & Sons at the "National September 11 Memorial & Museum" in 2016.

Sarah's inventive approach struck upon a formula that not only local concertgoers found engaging, but it placed Spartanburg on the world's music map as a community that is grounded, innovative, and progressive.

"There are many challenging things about being a Music Director as well as working for a non-profit organization — from how to continue to inspire musicians to perform their best from the podium, to managing severe budget cuts in hard times, to finding new, creative, and exciting ways to develop our audience-base within a limited marketing budget," she said.

"With the commitment that was already in place from many critical cornerstones, during my time I was fortunate to be able to foster growth in the artistic level of our output, develop and try new programs that reached into the community, seek and work with local artistic and educational partners, and bring further excellence to the stage of Twichell Auditorium and Barnet Park while also bringing great world-class soloists," she recalled.

In addition to her inspiring concerts that featured amazing guest artists such as deaf percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie, trumpeter Jens Lindeman, and guitarist Pepe Romero, Sarah always had a passion for music education. She played a leading role in making a pilot project into a countywide initiative that garnered widespread respect in both the education and music professions.

Link Up is a music education program created by Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute that connects the classroom with the concert hall. Throughout the year, thousands of local students are provided many opportunities to explore music, including learning to play an instrument. At the end of the year, they attend a special concert at Twichell Auditorium and perform with SPO.

"I have always had this interest, and I believe I would even without having my own children," the mother of three said. "I come from a family whose thirst for knowledge is never-ending. Music is a great place to foster that because I believe firmly that music opens doors for people, and of course the earlier that starts, the better! What I love about the Link Up is that the concert is from the audience as well as from the stage, all participatory, fun, engaging and the way educating should be in my opinion."

Currently, the Spartanburg Philharmonic Orchestra is engaged in a worldwide search for new Music Director. "Sarah has been able to solidify so much about the organization in the past two years so that the next conductor will have something really good to work with, musically and administratively," Johnson said. "I anticipate the next conductor will be thrilled with what he or she finds."

Adding to what will be expected of the next conductor, Boucher said, "I believe the next Music Director has very large shoes to fill. From the Board, to the staff, to the musicians, Sarah has been an instrumental guide in moving the SPO forward. The next Music Director will need to be as charming, passionate, and artistic to compare with Sarah."

Of all the many accomplishments that Sarah has made in Spartanburg, working toward the main goal — the delivery of music — has always been her focus. "I've tried to be a steadfast and reliable Music Director for the orchestra and always supportive of the talents within it. There has been much turnover in staff, which is natural with a highly demanding non-profit organization. Everyone I know who has been involved with the organization over the years has embraced the orchestra with great passion and a commitment to success, worked exceedingly hard, from board to staff members and of course, the musicians, too. I have tried to nurture all segments of our organization, all the while, trying to increase the artistic product and visibility of the orchestra onto a national level, and doing my best possible as a conductor to bring fantastic concerts to the stage."

And now, Spartanburg's music community is preparing for that final evening, that final performance, that final note, and that final bow from the woman who made music history. "A special committee has been working over the past few months to create an event during her final week in Spartanburg," Boucher said. "Everything is still coming together but think "Motorcycles and Mozart" to celebrate our SPO rock star!"

"Spartanburg Philharmonic Orchestra has great leadership, staff and musicians," Sarah said, in looking both back and forward. "It has the capacity to do great things in the future, and to nurture the city's underserved communities through rich music programs. Through teamwork and partnerships, and most of all, financial support, it can remain a high level performing organization of excellence, that can also touch the heart of the community with free and affordable performances that will continue to inspire hope, greatness and happiness in the community."

Bravo!

